

# ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S

## mystery magazine

### CONTENTS

#### NOVELETTE

THE 79 MURDERS OF MARTHA HILL GIBBS *by Joseph Csida*..... 103

#### SHORT STORIES

THE LEGACY OF PETER MORGAN *by Dion Henderson*..... 2

JUST BETWEEN US DAD *by Jack Ritchie*..... 13

THE DEVIL WITHIN *by Jack Morrison*..... 18

MEANWHILE, BACK AT THE BANK *by Richard Hill Wilkinson*..... 26

HILL JUSTICE *by John Faulkner*..... 36

DARK PURSUIT *by Virginia Pittinger*..... 50

THE DEADLY IMPERSONATION *by C. B. Gilford*..... 63

A LESSON IN MURDER *by Richard Hardwick*..... 80

THE DANGEROUS DANETREE SISTERS *by Wenzell Brown*..... 93

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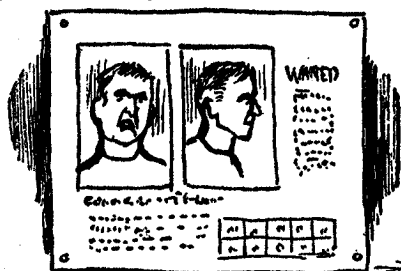
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# JUST Between



# Us, DAD

By Jack Ritchie

**J**AMIE was twelve and narrow-shouldered. He touched the day-old bruise on his cheek and studied his father. Then he spoke. "Dad, we went downtown to the main post office today."

Matt Corrigan scowled at him

of a pack hanging on the wall. It showed you from the front and the side."

Matt's big hands opened and closed. "Come here."

Jamie hesitated. He touched the bruise again. "Miss Thompson

*In the ideal state of things, a boy admires, respects, and tries to emulate his father. This holds true, I am assured, even when his father is not worthy of admiration or respect. Of course, once in a while, the son may think more clearly than the father, and in that case, the father would do well to emulate the son, the reverse English of a "chip off the old block".*



and leaned closer to the radio. The sixth race. Echo Hall, Black Ribbon, Teakwood. He cursed softly and reached for the can of beer beside his chair.

Jamie cleared his throat and raised his voice. "Your picture was in the post office, Dad."

Matt slowly raised his head.

"Miss Thompson took the whole class downtown this afternoon," Jamie said. "Like a tour, only it was school work. A man showed us how everybody worked and the mail goes through."

Matt's face was expressionless. "What about my picture?"

"It was way down in the bottom

wanted to know how I got this, but I didn't tell her. I said that I fell down the stairs."

"Never mind that. Did anybody else see the picture?"

Jamie shook his head. "No. They were paying attention to something else." His eyes went over his father's face. "I guess they took the picture a long time ago. You didn't have the mustache then and you had more hair. But I knew it was you."

Matt's hand went out and he pulled Jamie toward him. "Did you say *anything*? Anything at all to *anybody*?"

"I didn't say anything. Honest, I didn't."

Matt's fist tightened on the jacket front. "And don't *ever* say anything to anybody about that picture. Can you get that through your thick head?"

Jamie closed his eyes and nodded.

The hand released him.

Jamie stepped back and took a deep breath. There was a faint tic in the corner of one eye. "We're supposed to write a theme about what we saw at the post office, but I won't say anything about the picture."

His father reached for the can of beer and then changed his mind. He rose abruptly and went into the kitchen.

Jamie followed and watched him open the battered refrigerator and take out the bottle of bourbon.

Matt poured three fingers into a water glass and downed that. He tilted the bottle again and took the half-full glass back into the living room.

Jamie went to the refrigerator. He stared at the bottle, at the three cans of beer in the torn six-pack, at the sticky jar of peanut butter, at the half a pound of cheese. He closed the door.

He buttered a slice of bread and sat down at the oil cloth covered table. As he ate, he rocked slowly back and forth on the rear legs of the chair. His eyes went around the room to the single faucet sink, to the open shelves with their chipped dishes, to the iron-legged gas range, to the bare bulb in the ceiling fixture. He went to the sink and got a glass of water.

When he finished the slice of bread, he walked back into the living room.

Matt sat on the edge of the dirty green easy chair. Faint sweat had formed on his forehead.

Jamie licked his dry lips. "What's homicide?"

Matt's eyes gleamed dangerously. Jamie looked away. He walked around the room. He ran a finger along the scars on the end table, he touched the cluttered magazine



rack with his toe, and then he sat down on the davenport where the springs weren't broken.

The music from the radio faded and Jamie listened to the announcer. Then he spoke to his father. "That was the seventh race. Big Society by two lengths, Short Singer. . . ."

"Shut up!" Matt wiped his forehead and drank from the glass.

Jamie looked at the half-drawn window shade with the torn bottom. "Frankie's dad earns \$87.27 a week. Frankie told me."

Matt's fingers slowly revolved the glass in his hand. "I want you to forget about that picture. Understand?"

"I will." Jamie wiggled his toes to get them out of the holes in his socks. "Frankie has an uncle who

was electrocuted. How about that?"

Matt's eyes narrowed.

"He was working on a power line and there was a hole in his gloves and he touched a wire with 20,000 volts in it, or something like that. He was all burned and people said that he sort of danced until they could turn off the cur-

rent." Jamie frowned at the worn rug. "Frankie's got a real nice apartment. Everything's new. Like the refrigerator, and the sink, and the furniture, and the rugs."

Matt finished the glass. "You'll shoot off your mouth to somebody about that picture. I'll bet on it."

"No, I won't. I can keep a secret pretty good."

Matt coldly studied his son.

Jamie picked up a magazine. His fingers made damp prints on the pages.

The radio music stopped for the results of the eighth race. Matt irritably snapped it off.

His eyes went back to Jamie and after a while a thin hard smile came to his face. He seemed to nod to himself. "Jamie," he said softly. "How'd you like to take a little ride with me tonight?"

Jamie didn't look up. "Me? In your car?"

"Sure. In my car. We'll take a nice ride in the country for a couple of hours."

Jamie turned a page. "We won't see much. There's no moon."

Matt's voice hardened. "I said we'd take a ride."

Jamie nodded. "All right."

Matt went into the kitchen. When he came back the glass was three-quarters full. "A nice little ride in the country. The fresh air will do you good."

Jamie ran his hand over a worn spot on the davenport. "Why don't we get new furniture?"

Matt held a lighter to his cigarette. "Because I can't afford it."

"But you make \$96.57 a week, Dad. I once saw your pay check. That's \$9.30 more than Frankie's dad does. And there are just the two of us."

Matt snapped the lighter shut. "The hell with Frankie's dad. I said I couldn't afford it."

Jamie pulled a ravel from the frayed wristlet of his jacket. "Frankie's dad doesn't play the horses. Or drink. Except for a beer now and then. I guess that makes the difference."

Matt took a swallow from the glass. "We'll leave at eight tonight." He thought that over. "No. Nine."

"What time will we get back?"

Matt smiled without humor. "Don't worry about it."

Jamie stared at him and the tic began working again. "I made out my will today."

Matt still smiled faintly. "Will?"

"We got a project at school," Jamie said. "We're supposed to pick what we'd like to be when we grow up and then talk to somebody who's doing it. We write it up for the end of the semester and I picked a lawyer."

Matt waited.

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Jamie's words seemed to rush into one another. "I dropped in at this lawyer's office after school and talked to him and he happened to mention that lawyers make out wills too. And so I thought I'd be grown up and make one out and so I asked him how much. And he laughed and said that for me he'd do it for nothing."

He looked up at his father. "Well, not exactly a will, because I don't really have anything to leave. So I just wrote anything and pretended it was a will. It was sort of a letter, mostly bragging about how you earn more money than Frankie's dad and that you're important enough to have your picture in the post office."

Angry color rushed into Matt's face.

"But you don't have to worry about that, Dad," Jamie said quickly. "I mean the lawyer didn't read it. I wouldn't let him because I didn't want him to see that it wasn't really a will. He just sealed it and put it in his safe. And he won't open it unless I die or something like that. And I won't."

Matt towered over him. "You're lying, you little punk. You just made up the whole story. Right now."

Jamie said nothing.

Matt grabbed the jacket. "What's the name of this lawyer?"

"I don't remember. I don't even remember where his office is."

Matt drew back his fist.

Jamie's face was pale, but he met his father's eyes steadily. "That won't help me remember. Nothing will. No matter what you do, I won't remember. You can even kill me."

Matt stared at his son. After a minute he slowly released his grip.

Jamie straightened his jacket front. A small smile came to his face. His voice was soft and almost hissed with threat. "You'll stop playing the horses. Right now. You'll stop drinking. Right now. We'll get the new furniture."

He went to the door and then turned. "And I just thought of something else. I want a bicycle." His dark eyes flickered. "You'll take care of that too, won't you, Dad?"

